

# GLOBAL CONTEMPORARY ARTIST ANALYSIS

## ARCHIVE PROJECT

### WENDY RED STAR: CULTURAL IDENTITY AND THE POST-COLONIAL WORLD

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[Wendy Red Star, *Spring*, pigment-based inkjet print, 2006, Portland Art Museum.]

This short art analysis paper accompanies an original video presentation produced by UTC undergraduate students, dedicated to the work of a contemporary artist and developed as part of ART 4190r: Global Contemporary Art course in Spring 2021.

Wendy Red Star is an Apsáalooke, or Crow, artist born in 1981.<sup>1</sup> She grew up on a Crow reservation in Montana.<sup>2</sup> She was born to a Crow father and an Irish mother.<sup>3</sup> Her father was a rock musician, her uncle a painter, and her grandmother sewed traditional Crow clothing and beadwork.<sup>4</sup> She has a daughter named Beatrice that has made an appearance and been an influence in some of her artworks.<sup>5</sup> She is currently living in Portland, Oregon. She has a BFA from Montana State University, Bozeman and an MFA in Sculpture from the University of California, Los Angeles.<sup>6</sup> Her work has been exhibited in a variety of places including The Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Seattle Art Museum.<sup>7</sup> Red Star does extensive research of her Crow heritage, including finding and researching old photographs.<sup>8</sup>

A key theme in many of Wendy Red Star's artworks is cultural identity. In "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," Stuart Hall questions the concept of identity. He refers to the definition of identity

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<sup>1</sup> "Wendy Red Star," accessed April 27, 2021, <http://portlandartmuseum.us/mwebcgi/mweb.exe?request=record:id=18356:type=701>.

<sup>2</sup> Monani, Salma, and Seymour, Nicole, "How Wendy Red Star Decolonizes the Museum with Humor and Play," Edge Effects, October 8, 2020. Retrieved from <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/esfac/113/>.

<sup>3</sup> Abaki, Beck, "Decolonizing Photography: A Conversation with Wendy Red Star," December 14, 2016, accessed April 27, 2021, <https://aperture.org/editorial/wendy-red-star/>.

<sup>4</sup> Morgan Mentzer, "Wendy Red Star: Owning Your Power," American Artscape Magazine, no. 1 (2018), retrieved from <https://www.arts.gov/stories/magazine/2018/1/women-arts-galvanizing-encouraging-inspiring/wendy-red-star>.

<sup>5</sup> Monani, Salma, and Seymour, Nicole, "How Wendy Red Star Decolonizes the Museum with Humor and Play," Edge Effects, October 8, 2020. Retrieved from <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/esfac/113/>.

<sup>6</sup> Wendy Red Star, "About," accessed April 27, 2021, <https://www.wendyredstar.com/about-1>.

<sup>7</sup> Monani, Salma, and Seymour, Nicole, "How Wendy Red Star Decolonizes the Museum with Humor and Play," Edge Effects, October 8, 2020. Retrieved from <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/esfac/113/>.

<sup>8</sup> Red Star, Wendy and Vittoria, Shannon, "Apsáalooke Bacheeítuuk in Washington, DC: A Case Study in Re-Reading Nineteenth-Century Delegation Photography," *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 6, no. 2 (2020): 1-22. doi: 10.24926/24716839.10672.

where people come together as a group because they are similar in some way.<sup>9</sup> However, he also defines identity as being more complex than just people with something in common. He believes that identity is created, and not from a single source. It is scattered about rather than overpowered with the dominant culture.<sup>10</sup> People strive to not be assimilated or broken when it comes to their identity. According to Hall, identity transcends time; it is the past and the future.<sup>11</sup> Wendy Red Star's theme of cultural identity is evident in her artworks where she represents her heritage as a Native American. Through her artwork, she also tackles issues of sexism and her own personal identity. This is what Stuart Hall is referring to when he defines identity as created and not from a single source. Additionally, Red Star's works often deal with appropriation and decolonization. This also relates to Hall's ideas on how identity is not overpowered with the dominant culture. I will look at two artworks by Wendy Red Star that make these connections.

The first piece by Wendy Red Star that I will be analyzing is *Spring* from the series *Four Seasons* (see fig. 1 at the end of this document).<sup>12</sup> Created in 2006, it is a pigment-based inkjet print that is 21x24 inches.<sup>13</sup> Red Star is in the center of an outdoor scene surrounded by animals and plant life wearing an elk-tooth dress.<sup>14</sup> Working with soft materials such as weaving was a form of art for

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<sup>9</sup> Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 223.

<sup>10</sup> Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 225.

<sup>11</sup> Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 225.

<sup>12</sup> Wendy Red Star. *Spring*, ca. 2006, pigment-based inkjet print, 21x24 in., Portland Art Museum, accessed April 27, 2021, <http://portlandartmuseum.us/mwebcgi/mweb.exe?request=record;id=77954;type=101>.

<sup>13</sup> "Spring, from the series Four Seasons," accessed April 27, 2021, <http://portlandartmuseum.us/mwebcgi/mweb.exe?request=record;id=77954;type=101>.

<sup>14</sup> Monani, Salma, and Seymour, Nicole, "How Wendy Red Star Decolonizes the Museum with Humor and Play," *Edge Effects*, October 8, 2020. Retrieved from <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/esfac/113/>.

Native American women.<sup>15</sup> The elk teeth in the dress show the status of the wearer and their family. The number of teeth signifies trading and hunting skills of men in the family. In *Hearts of Our People: Native Women Artists*, Red Star describes how the dress in her art symbolizes Crow womanhood and line connecting her to her ancestors from the maternal side.<sup>16</sup> In contrast, the animals are made from cardboard, and the grass is Astroturf. There is even a visible crease in the scenic background image, reminiscent of a magazine page. This does in fact point to publications such as *National Geographic* that have misrepresented indigenous peoples.<sup>17</sup> This kind of background also refers to 1970s scenic landscapes.<sup>18</sup> In “How Wendy Red Star Decolonizes the Museum with Humor and Play,” Red Star described visiting a natural history museum and noticing that the Native American display was placed next to the dinosaur display. This misrepresentation is being called out by the fake materials reminiscent of a museum diorama.<sup>19</sup> Museums also often give a Native American timeline while leaving out or watering down the genocide of them as a people.<sup>20</sup> At the heart of this piece is a call to revoke stereotypes of Native Americans that have been around since white settlers arrived.<sup>21</sup> One

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<sup>15</sup> Farris, Phoebe, “Contemporary Native American Women Artists: Visual Expressions of Feminism, the Environment, and Identity,” *Feminist Studies* 31, no. 1 (2005): 95.

<sup>16</sup> Red Star, Wendy, “Legacy,” in *Hearts of Our People: Native Women Artists*, eds. Jill Ahlberg Yohe and Teri Greeves (Minnesota: University of Washington Press, 2020), 141.

<sup>17</sup> Monani, Salma, and Seymour, Nicole, “How Wendy Red Star Decolonizes the Museum with Humor and Play,” *Edge Effects*, October 8, 2020. Retrieved from <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/esfac/113/>.

<sup>18</sup> Zarkovich, Josephine, “Making Noise: Wendy Red Star,” *CUE Art Foundation*, May 12, 2017. Retrieved from <https://cueartfoundation.org/young-art-critics-essays/making-noise-wendy-red-star-by-josephine-zarkovich>.

<sup>19</sup> Monani, Salma, and Seymour, Nicole, “How Wendy Red Star Decolonizes the Museum with Humor and Play,” *Edge Effects*, October 8, 2020. Retrieved from <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/esfac/113/>.

<sup>20</sup> Monani, Salma, and Seymour, Nicole, “How Wendy Red Star Decolonizes the Museum with Humor and Play,” *Edge Effects*, October 8, 2020. Retrieved from <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/esfac/113/>.

<sup>21</sup> Monani, Salma, and Seymour, Nicole, “How Wendy Red Star Decolonizes the Museum with Humor and Play,” *Edge Effects*, October 8, 2020. Retrieved from <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/esfac/113/>.

such stereotype that can be seen here is the trope of the ecological native that lives in harmony with nature.<sup>22</sup> This can also be seen as exoticism.<sup>23</sup> Stuart Hall's definition of identity is strong here. Red Star creates commentary on how her identity does not belong to the dominant culture by decolonizing the museum.

The second piece I will be analyzing is *Badman's Climax* from the *White Squaw* series (see fig. 2 at the end of this document).<sup>24</sup> Created in 2013, it is a digitally edited book cover from a series of books published from 1983-1992.<sup>25</sup> <sup>26</sup> Red Star poses as the main character of the books by E.J. Hunter.<sup>27</sup> It is important to look at the slur "squaw" here. It was used by white settlers as a derogatory term to refer to Native American women. In Algonquin and Mohawk languages, it means female genitalia.<sup>28</sup> In the photo, Red Star is seen eating Land O'Lakes butter. This brand of butter's mascot is a racist stereotype of a Native American woman. By posing on this book cover and consuming the

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<sup>22</sup> Monani, Salma, and Seymour, Nicole, "How Wendy Red Star Decolonizes the Museum with Humor and Play," *Edge Effects*, October 8, 2020. Retrieved from <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/esfac/113/>.

<sup>23</sup> Zarkovich, Josephine, "Making Noise: Wendy Red Star," *CUE Art Foundation*, May 12, 2017. Retrieved from <https://cueartfoundation.org/young-art-critics-essays/making-noise-wendy-red-star-by-josephine-zarkovich>.

<sup>24</sup> Wendy Red Star. *Badman's Climax*, ca. 2013, Oregon Artswatch Archive, accessed April 27, 2021, <https://archive.orartswatch.org/installing-i-m-n-d-n-with-curator-todd-clark/>.

<sup>25</sup> Barry Johnson, "Installing 'I.M.N.D.N.' with curator Todd Clark," January 11, 2014, accessed April 27, 2021, <https://archive.orartswatch.org/installing-i-m-n-d-n-with-curator-todd-clark/>.

<sup>26</sup> Journee, Aurélie, "Tuer Pocahontas. Déconstruction et reconstruction identitaires dans l'œuvre *White Squaw* de l'artiste contemporaine amérindienne Wendy Red Star (1981-)," *L'Ecole des Haute Etudes en Sciences Sociales*. April 10, 2015.

<sup>27</sup> Zarkovich, Josephine, "Making Noise: Wendy Red Star," *CUE Art Foundation*, May 12, 2017. Retrieved from <https://cueartfoundation.org/young-art-critics-essays/making-noise-wendy-red-star-by-josephine-zarkovich>.

<sup>28</sup> Merskin, Debra, "The S-Word: Discourse, Stereotypes, and the American Indian Woman," *The Howard Journal of Communications* 21 (2010): 348. doi: 10.1080/10646175.2010.519616.

butter, Red Star reclaims Native identity.<sup>29</sup> There is an eco-erotic trope that is being expressed by the books that I believe is being taken on here. Just as Native Americans have been stereotyped as being one with the earth, there is also a sexist stereotype of the female Native American being sexualized in this way.<sup>30</sup> The viewer may find Red Star posing in a mockery of these Native American stereotypes that can still be seen to this day and see that it is ridiculous.<sup>31</sup> However, it is sobering and eye opening to see that we do in fact still retain such stereotypes to this day. Red Star is once again reclaiming her cultural identity and calling out cultural appropriation, connecting with Stuart Hall's ideas on how identity is not singular and does not belong to a dominant culture.

Wendy Red Star's art uses humor and cultural identity to make viewers think about how things are and how we must proceed in a post-colonial world. Insight on what cultural identity is in a post-colonial world can be seen in Stuart Hall's *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*. Moving forward, there is a call for decolonization in the art world. A lack of Native art in museums called for change in the 1990s.<sup>32</sup> Steps are still being taken by indigenous peoples to reclaim their art.<sup>33</sup> Wendy Red Star's art is a powerful step in that direction.

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<sup>29</sup> Zarkovich, Josephine, "Making Noise: Wendy Red Star," *CUE Art Foundation*, May 12, 2017. Retrieved from <https://cueartfoundation.org/young-art-critics-essays/making-noise-wendy-red-star-by-josephine-zarkovich>.

<sup>30</sup> Nelson, Melissa K, "Getting Dirty: The Eco-Eroticism of Women in Indigenous Oral Literatures," in *Ongoing Storms and Struggles: Gendered Violence and Resource Exploitation*, ed. Joanne Barker (Duke University Press, 2017), 233.

<sup>31</sup> Journee, Aurélie, "Tuer Pocahontas. Déconstruction et reconstruction identitaires dans l'œuvre White Squaw de l'artiste contemporaine amérindienne Wendy Red Star (1981-)," *L'Ecole des Haute Etudes en Sciences Sociales*. April 10, 2015.

<sup>32</sup> Ash-Milby, Kathleen and Phillips, Ruth B, "Inclusivity or Sovereignty? Native American Arts in the Gallery and the Museum Since 1992," *Art Journal* 76, no. 2 (2017): 11. doi: doi-org.proxy.lib.utc.edu/10.1080/00043249.2017.1367190.

<sup>33</sup> Ian McLean, *Double Desire : Transculturation and Indigenous Contemporary Art* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014) 139.

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"Wendy Red Star." Accessed April 27, 2021. <http://portlandartmuseum.us/mwebcgi/mweb.exe?request=record;id=18356;type=701>.

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## Images



Fig. 1. Portland Art Museum. Accessed April 27, 2021.

<http://portlandartmuseum.us/mwebcgi/mweb.exe?request=record;id=77954;type=101>.

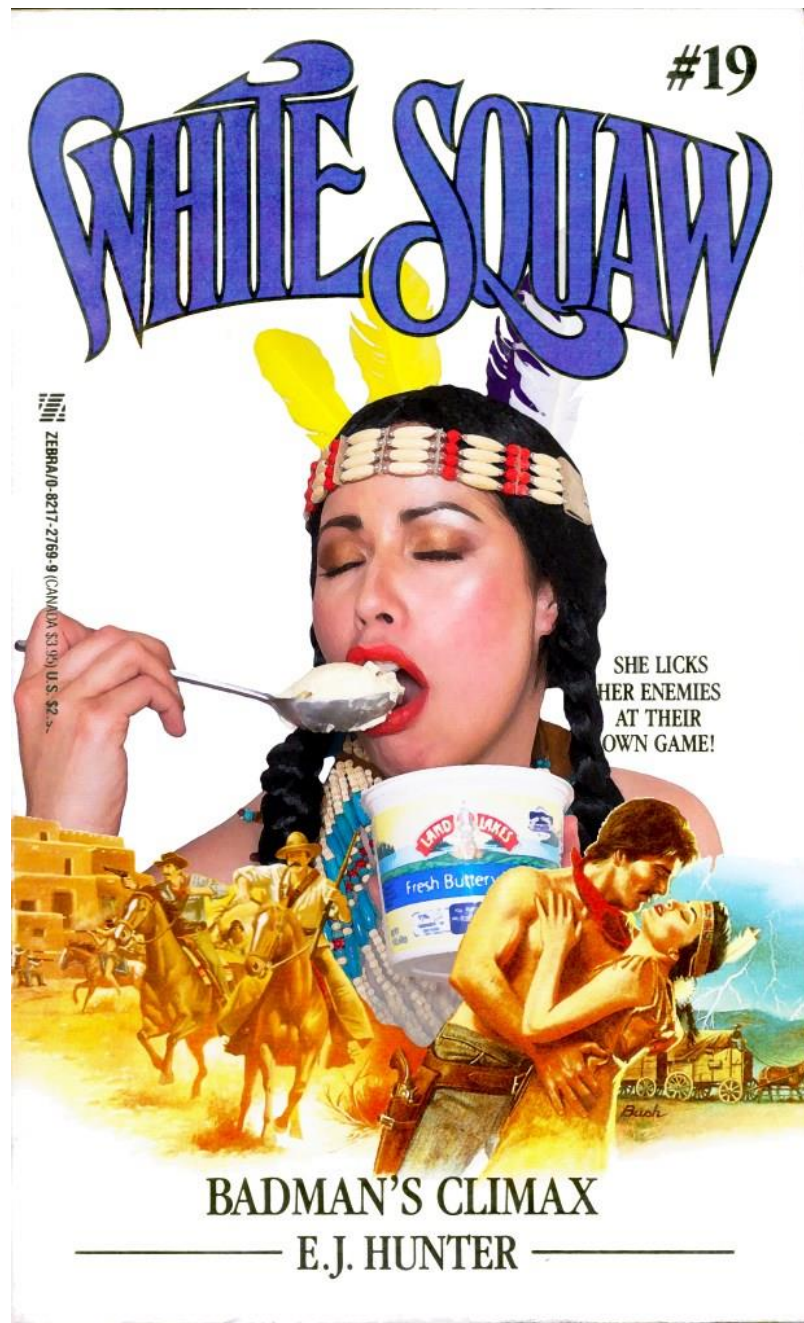


Fig. 2. Oregon Artswatch Archive. Accessed April 27, 2021.

<https://archive.orartswatch.org/installing-i-m-n-d-n-with-curator-todd-clark/>.